

Human Goodness and Rashdall's Refutation of Hedonism

(See 1946.002 for an introduction to FB's Balliol essays.)

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Before attempting an answer to the question What is human goodness? it is necessary to deal with an obstacle which lies across our path, namely the claim of Hedonism that human good lies in the pursuit and attainment of pleasure, and that nothing but pleasure can possibly be desired. For the purpose of refuting this theory it is convenient to make use of the argument of Hastings Rashdall, which may be summarized as follows:

The plausibility of Hedonism rests in a confusion between three possible interpretations of it:

1. That that action is done which gives most pleasure at the moment.
2. That the motive of an action is always some future pleasure.
3. That the motive is to obtain the greatest pleasure on the whole.

It is a commonplace of experience that men frequently perform an act although knowing that it will not give them as much pleasure as a different act would provide, e.g. a man with a delicate digestion, knowing that lobster mayonnaise is very bad for him, will decide never to eat it. He may go to a dinner-party however, and, although when he sees his *bête noir* on the menu he firmly decides not to touch it, when the dish is set before him he is tempted, and, making excuses to himself the while, he is quite likely to eat it. Ten minutes previously that man was fully confident that eating lobster mayonnaise would, on balance, give him less pleasure than abstaining, yet when the dish is immediately before him his view alters. We cannot say he has forgotten what he knew previously, and if we say that he has persuaded himself that more pleasure is to be got from eating the dish then a bias in favour of immediate pleasure is implied and therefore only the first of the three views above is satisfied.

On the other hand people frequently endure present discomfort, or the forgoing of a lesser pleasure, in the expectation of some greater pleasure to come, e.g. the person who deprives himself of small luxuries in order to save up for a holiday. This disposes of the first view.

In order further to prove that the first view is also untrue we may take the example of an angry man who is about to ill-treat his wife. He undoubtedly expects to obtain pleasure out of venting his fury by beating his wife, but in a calm moment he might admit that he would obtain more pleasure by drinking a bottle of beer than by such an act. However, if at the height of his rage the man is offered a bottle of beer on condition that he does not carry out the beating, he is likely to throw the bottle aside, heedless of whether it breaks, and carry out his intended act all the more savagely. So we see that the action which would give most pleasure at the moment is not that which is necessarily performed, and the first view of Hedonism is exploded.

If what is desired is not pleasure *qua* pleasure but a particular *kind* of pleasure then the implication is that something is desired besides pleasure, and that the pleasure which accompanies an act can, in many cases, only be accounted for by pre-existent desire.

The fact that a thing is desired no doubt implies that the satisfaction of the desire will necessarily bring pleasure. There is undoubtedly pleasure in the satisfaction of all desire. But that is a very different thing from asserting that the object is desired because it is thought of as pleasant, and in proportion as it is thought of as pleasant. The hedonistic psychology involves, according to the stock phrase, a "hysteron-proteron", it puts the cart before the

horse. In reality, the imagined pleasantness is created by the desire, not the desire by the imagined pleasantness.

As it is not possible to believe that human goodness consists in a condition merely incidental to the satisfaction of a desire, we must seek elsewhere for our definition. It can hardly be disputed that that man achieves perfect goodness who fulfils absolutely the objects for which he was created. In order to discover what these objects are – setting aside religious enlightenment – it is necessary to understand the true nature of man. An aid to such understanding is given by Plato in Book IX of the *Republic* when Socrates draws an image of the soul of man as a threefold entity:

‘Fashion me, therefore, one form of a many-coloured and many-headed beast. There is a ring of heads both of tame and wild beasts, and it can change them and produce them out of itself at will... Then give me two more forms, one of a lion and one of a man. But the first form of all is to be the largest, and the second, second largest... Now join these three into one so that somehow or other they have a common nature... Now outside mould round about them an individual image – that of a man – so that to him who cannot see within, but looks only at the outer shell, the whole appears one living creature, and that a man.’

These three entities within – the many-headed beast, the lion and the man, represent the ‘gain-loving’¹, the ‘honour-loving’ and the philosophic² parts of man, and Socrates is made to illustrate the effects of bad moral conduct on them. Injustice, he says, makes strong the monster and the lion and leaves weak the man, whilst justice enables the man to act as a ‘gardener’, tending the many-headed monster, fostering the tame heads, and, with the help of the lion, preventing the wild ones from sprouting. In the same way all such vices as obstinacy, bad temper, luxury and softness, toadying, and meanness are shown to feed the passions and harm the noble parts of man. So we may say that that act is good which brings forth and strengthens the noble side of man’s nature, which Plato identifies with the ‘philosophical’, or knowledge-seeking quality.

In this view we are in agreement with Kant in stating virtue, and the happiness which accompanies it, to be the aim of human existence. As Rashdall points out, however, there are other qualities open to man which we recognize intuitively to be also of value, e.g. culture. In order for a man to distinguish between good and evil conduct it is necessary for him to make a *judgment* (in which he is usually guided by conscience or the intuitive faculty). This judgment requires experience of man’s nature which is often beyond the reach of a single individual – hence the importance of Authority in Ethics. The fundamental idea in Ethics is the idea of Value, in which the idea of ‘ought’ is implicitly contained, and, in Rashdall’s words:

‘In some cases a state of feeling is judged to have an absolute value, which, though more or less pleasant, is not measured merely by its pleasantness . . . such states of feeling form in and for themselves . . . an element in that ideal good which we recognize it as our duty to promote.’

It cannot be said that we have succeeded in defining what many writers and thinkers have concluded is indefinable³ but it is probably felt more clearly than it is possible to describe in words where lies the borderline between good and evil in human conduct. This feeling may be arrived at by *a priori* reasoning (as in Kant), by intuition (which is liable to prove less accurate) or by the devotion to self-love and benevolence recommended by Joseph Butler. We may conclude by essaying the formulation of the principle of human goodness as follows:

¹ Seeking money etc. as a prelude to satisfying desires such as hunger, thirst etc.

² Knowledge-seeking.

³ For example Moore in *Principia Ethica* proves in a striking manner that ‘good is indefinable’.

'That act is only good which tends to promote, in the doer or receiver, an increase or development of the noble side of human nature.'